

– which the present author refers to as “aesthetic empathy” (Kim 2013, 2015) – by investigating the relationship between subcategories such as positive physical reactions, (visual) imagery a micro-phenomenological and aesthetic enjoyment. In advancing neurophenomenological research, in which the structures of experience could be compared to the structures of neural activity, thorough investigation of the extent to which the process of categorization of first-person descriptions collected by micro-phenomenological interviews can allow researchers to reveal hierarchical structures of experience appears necessary. Intense discussion in the near future about an appropriate micro-phenomenological analysis method, tying in with a few papers including the target article, would therefore be desirable.

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First-Person Experiences, Privatism and the Evaluation of Structural Content

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> Abstract • I analyze how the micro-phenomenological analysis deals with the challenge of “privatism,” before noting some remaining questions concerning the justification of the procedure and its findings.

Introduction

« 1 » The nature of first-person data is still a matter of scientific controversy. Just as controversial is the question of how we get access to mental states and processes in cognitive psychology, neuropsychology, psychophysics and consciousness studies. While it is undisputed that, after the turn to cognitive science in psychology, first-person conscious experiences are legitimate objects of scientific inquiry (Baars 2003), the question remains as to whether first-person data are “directly accessible only to the subjects” experiencing them (Piccinini 2009: 3). Gualtiero Piccinini calls this position “privatism” and claims that its consequence is to invalidate any intersubjective or public evaluation of first-person data (ibid). He gives two reasons for this conclusion:

- a private data cannot be “reproduced by independent observers” and
- b he data gleaned from first-person experience cannot be validated (or falsified) by publicly accessible means (ibid: 4).

« 2 » As I interpret it, the target article by Camila Valenzuela-Moguillansky & Alejandra Vásquez-Rosati on the micro-phenomenological interview method establishes exactly the converse. Subjects, they maintain, do indeed have direct access to their pre-reflectively conscious states and processes. The analytic procedure of the micro-phenomenological interview technique explicates, however, how the reliability of first-person data can be intersubjectively assessed. In the following comments, I show how the analytic procedure of the micro-

phenomenological interview technique attempts to establish this, but I also note some issues that remain for future research, especially with regard to the structural content of micro-phenomenological analysis.

Evocation, experience and categorical analysis

« 3 » As the authors point out in §3, it is the aim of the micro-phenomenological interview method to obtain detailed procedural descriptions of individual implicit experiences on the part of interviewees. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that the stages of data preparation from the “transcription of the interview” to the “refinement of the data” and the “final selection for analysis” (§§17–25) are based on first-person experiences of the interviewees. Experiences themselves are thus, from the outset, an integral part of the micro-phenomenological approach. Interviewers encourage their interviewees step by step and in a controlled way to *evoke* their embodied experiences (Petitmengin 2006: 245). Interviewees should refrain, for instance, from theorizing about their pre-reflective experiences and focus instead on the procedural dimension of concrete conscious bodily phenomena, such as experiencing their heart rates “from the inside.” The proponents of micro-phenomenology have developed indirect criteria to evaluate the authenticity of this process, something they term “performative consistency” (sometimes also “called performative coherence,” Bitbol & Petitmengin 2013: 271). This is one indication of how, pace Piccinini, the *reliability* of first-person experiences of conscious phenomena can be evaluated by publicly accessible means without reducing them to observable behavior for purely textual descriptions (for a further contrasting position see Dennett 2003).

« 4 » A further decisive element in validating the micro-phenomenological interview procedure is that it moves from the *fleeting* single first-person experiences to their *invariant underlying structure* in a Husserlian sense (Marbach 2007). In §5, the authors specify this structure as a network consisting of descriptive categories that are *independent of the experiential content*. How should we understand this “independence claim”? (Q1) Let me go into this question

in a bit more detail. To obtain synchronic or diachronic structural units from utterances, the authors specify that the initial grouping of utterances used to identify different diachronic units be related to their *extensional properties*. This is in accordance with the overall approach of micro-phenomenology of developing categories out of the interview data without pre-specified concepts that would require an explicit definition (intensional specification) of the properties of classes. But a question arises here. How can this approach justify the independence claim when the process of abstraction and development of semantic networks or synchronic units is accomplished exclusively in strict relationship to concrete instances of the (transcribed) experiential content? I shall return to this question in the final section.

« 5 » The methodological foundation of the authors’ categorical approach involves the above-mentioned “invariance” properties of the structure. In §83 the question is raised as to how “invariant” a synchronic or diachronic unit has to be in order to be viewed as part of a generic structure representing types of experiences and their relations. What is at stake here is that, in the last instance, a modal characterization of the structure is being sought. What the interviewees need to analyze and decide is whether the category or unit of utterance in question is *indispensable* for the understanding of the experiences/units in question. In other words, to reduce – in the spirit of the phenomenological reduction – the varieties and richness of the described experiences to their essences means to specify their necessary components. This gives us the fundamental answer as to how micro-phenomenology seeks to avoid the consequences of privatism. Phenomenal experiences communicated by interviewees are transcribed by a team of trained interviewers and assessed in a methodologically controlled way in order to obtain findings such as *types* of synchronic or diachronic experiences.

« 6 » Even though the procedure aims at discovering necessary components within first-person experiences, the entire research process is open to falsification. This is so because each outcome is the result of a complicated “network analysis” that is fo-

cused, for instance, on the synchronic enfolding of “getting into contact with one’s own body (heartbeats).” To specify the necessary properties (invariances) – including those at different stages of abstraction – requires a holistic and hierarchical explication of the entire structure, an explication that is reminiscent of the *hermeneutical circle* (Stanghellini & Aragona 2016: 34f). Thus, the specification of single units (parts) with regard to the entire structure (and vice versa) is by no means immune to errors, so that the results are always open to public correction and further refinement. In addition, one can archive or test the findings, for instance, by repeating the entire interview procedure or by going back to the stage of re-sequencing the textual descriptions to identify units in the stream of experiences.

Exploring the access to categorical content

« 7 » Consideration of these processes raises another question. On what basis does a micro-phenomenological analysis identify the underlying structural units of phenomenal descriptions? (Q2) In the concluding paragraph, the authors indicate that this question is an explanatory challenge for the micro-phenomenological method, since the grouping process is supposed to start without any pre-specified categories. If this is the case, however, then there are no (categorical) criteria for selecting and combining the extensional properties in the first place. The analysis requires – from the outset – *intensional properties* as well; otherwise it could not even get off the ground. To solve this challenge is decisive for the justification of the entire micro-phenomenological research project. If intensional properties are already operative at the pre-reflective level of the grouping analysis, then one must clarify how we can get methodologically controlled access to them at the reflexive phenomenological level as well. Such a procedure is required because, so long as the generation of structure as such remains a “blind spot,” one cannot rule out the possibility that the determination of synchronic and diachronic units might simply be outcomes of individual and cultural biases.

« 8 » As the authors indicate, this challenge is not insurmountable, since one could also analyze the extraction of inten-

sional properties or invariants in further micro-phenomenological analyses. This proposal implies, however, that the underlying categorical content (structure) of such experiences as “getting in contact with my own body” can itself be transformed into an explicit object of experience and analysis. In the philosophical tradition, this capacity is known as intuition. George Bealer, for instance, has defined “intuition” as an intellectual ability to gain access to conceptual, logical, mathematical or modal content on an *evidential basis* that is *independent* of observational (sensory-mediated) experience (Bealer 1999: 249). This approach potentially offers an interesting further ground for the independence claim. If there exists a human faculty allowing access to structural properties, this might help us understand how to begin the initial derivation of categories in the grouping process of the micro-phenomenological interview method. By analyzing the extensional properties (multifarious descriptions of getting in contact with one’s own body, for instance) intuitions are already operative in the way we find suitable intensional properties to *classify* the synchronic and diachronic units of the process. In contrast to fleeting experiences, intuitions enable first-person access to structural content, such as in the mathematics that is required to understand the necessary relations in question.

« 9 » All this leads to interesting research pathways and intriguing questions for further micro-phenomenological studies: is there a faculty of intuition that is related to human thinking and categorical content? And if so, how are the different types of content (structural and non-structural) related to each other in the process of analysis? As we have seen, it is important to make headway with regard to those questions in order to provide a thorough justification of micro-phenomenological findings.

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Epoché, Verbal Descriptions and Corpus Size in the Conduct and Analysis of Explicitation Interviews

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> **Abstract** • Valenzuela-Moguillansky & Vásquez-Rosati have framed out a detailed and meaningful procedure to analyze micro-phenomenological interviews. Here, we comment on two aspects: the place of verbal descriptions during data collection and analysis, and whether the authors’ analytical procedure can be scaled to large sets of interviews.

« 1 » Camila Valenzuela-Moguillansky & Alejandra Vásquez-Rosati have done an excellent job of providing a detailed and meaningful analytical procedure for micro-phenomenological interviews. We find their attempt helpful in providing precise terms – such as descriptemes, grouping, aggregation and other abstraction operations – and clear concepts for the successive steps of the analysis. It is helpful especially because during our own analyses, we have often struggled to clearly grasp the impact apparently small decisions can have on later interpretations. Their target article undoubtedly strengthens the rigorous study of lived experience, and future research will gain in transparency, falsifiability and overall credibility by resting on a well-defined epistemology built on thoroughly justified practices.

« 2 » In this commentary, we reflect on two issues related to micro-phenomenological interviews and their analysis. The first issue relates to the place of language in the successive semiotic transformations taking place between the interviewee’s original lived experience and the final outputs of the analysis. The second issue is the possibility